Re-igniting the passion in HaSS: an exploration of pre-service teachers’ experiences

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Introduction

• Dr Deborah Green - Lecturer in the School of Education at UniSA.

• Coordination and delivery of Humanities and Social Science Education to preservice teachers
  • Early Childhood, Primary, Primary/Middle & Secondary strands.
  • Bachelor of Education & Masters of Teaching.

• Secondary Teaching
  • HaSS - major or minor = 3 courses over 2 years.

• Core course in the Bachelor of Education or the Masters of Teaching (Early Childhood/Primary or Primary Middle).

• The data from Study Period 7 (November) last year.
Rationale for this study

• Humanities and Social Science (HaSS) is a complex learning area
  • History, Geography, Civics & Citizenship and Business and Economics
  • Up to 16 SACE subjects

• Programming
  • Shorter study periods due to Professional Experience.
  • An intensive mode (6 sessions from 9-1 across 3 weeks).
  • Content or pedagogy?

• Student perceptions
  • Lack interest in HaSS, disengaged, lacked content knowledge
  • Motivating them was often challenging

• Need to understand pre-service teachers’ preconceptions and prior experiences
The project

- Qualitative approach comprising of 2 open-ended surveys
  - Pre and post course
- Pre-course qualitative survey
  - Completed on day one of the course
  - 3 open-ended questions
    - Think back to your school days. Describe your recollections of SOSE, or its equivalent. What activities did you complete? What was the most memorable learning?
    - How do you feel about commencing this course (HaSS) and what are your expectations?
    - How motivated and confident do you feel about teaching this subject area at the moment?
The project (cont’d)

- Post-course qualitative survey
  - Completed at the conclusion of the final day of the course
  - 3 open-ended questions
    - How do you feel about this course (HaSS) now?
    - How motivated and confident do you feel about teaching this subject area?
    - What has been the most memorable or significant contribution this course has made to your learning?

- Data was analysed using NVivo 10 software
Participants

- **Pre-Course Survey:**

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- **Post-Course Survey**

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Pre-course findings

Think back to your school days. Describe your recollections of SOSE, or its equivalent. What activities did you complete? What was the most memorable learning?

• Vague or no recollection
  • ‘I remember doing the class but none of the content’.
  • ‘I vaguely remember doing a poster on Egypt...all about remembering dates and types of clouds. I dropped both history and geography as soon as possible’

• Recollection of worksheets, posters and rote learning of dates etc.
  • ‘I remember little from History other than it was boring!’
  • ‘I loved watching the videos like ‘Gallipoli’ and ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’ as they ‘brought history to life’.

• Student who studied in England recalled positive experiences
  • ‘I loved history – my favourite was my personal project on Queen Elizabeth and Elizabethan England’.

Image: clipart
How do you feel about commencing this course (HaSS) and what are your expectations?

• Eager and excited to learn yet overwhelmed by the complexity of this learning area.
  • ‘I am very excited to learn more about this area because I don’t have a very good understanding of well-known historical events. I am hoping to learn about interactive and creative ways to engage students and help them inquire into historical ideas.’
  • ‘I don’t remember a lot in HaSS so am keen to find ways and suitable content in order to successfully teach at primary school’
  • ‘I am excited because I envisage it as a wonderful opportunity to have a glimpse of major events of the past (especially World Wars which I never studied).’
  • ‘I am really looking towards it as I have never enjoyed this subject as a child because of teacher centred approach.’

• Apprehensive and nervous - learning area is difficult/confronting and they lacked knowledge.
  • ‘Anxious my knowledge of war and history is limited’
  • ‘I avoid the news and find the topic of war depressing to consider. So this topic will be difficult for me’
  • ‘Worried about how little I actually know about some of the topics’
How motivated and confident do you feel about teaching this subject area at the moment?

- Majority of students reported feeling unmotivated, unconfident and lacked confidence
  - ‘Not very [confident]! I don’t feel like I know enough and worry that my knowledge is based on mainstream media – i.e. movies, TV shows’
  - ‘Not very confident on the Australian curriculum’

- Others felt confident in some areas and not others.
  - ‘In early childhood education I am not confident at all teaching this subject. I think the ACARA learning areas in HaSS at the early years will be incorporating personal history and environment care which I feel confident teaching, however anything in greater depth I am not confident’

- Being passionate about a topic appeared to increase confidence.
  - ‘I feel very motivated and slightly confident. HaSS is an area that I am very passionate about! I am excited to teach this topic.’

- Recent professional experience also helped to motivate others.
  - ‘I am enthusiastic because during my practicum I got a chance to teach ‘mummification’ (Egyptian history). I enjoyed it thoroughly. I am looking forward to do more in ancient history. I am keen to learn more.’
Summary of pre-course findings

• Very little prior knowledge of HaSS
• Lacked confidence
• Demotivated and disengaged from the topic
• Lacked interest
• Concerned that they were not equipped with key content knowledge
• Recognised a need for a different approach to be taken
• To spark passion and interest a new course that challenged thinking as adults and aligned with curriculum was developed
Literature on Maths – how does it relate to HaSS?

• Teachers’ attitudes have a powerful influence on their practice (Charalambos, Philippou & Kyriakides 2002; Ernest 2000).
  • Negative beliefs in maths can influence learned helplessness in students.
  • Positive beliefs - students success; students see subject as worthy to study (Karp 1991).

• Where do these negative beliefs originate?
  • Secondary school (Brown, McNamara, Hanley & Jones 1999; Nicol, Gooya & Martin 2002)
  • Early to middle primary school experiences (Uusimaki & Nason 2004).
  • ‘A lack of knowledge and poor attitudes towards mathematics exhibited by many pre-service elementary teachers may inhibit their learning and later use of effective methods for teaching’ (Battista 1986, p 10).

• Negative perceptions = less likely to plan lessons and avoid teaching.

• PST identified a lack of experiences or activities that were unengaging and left no mark on their learning.
  • Failure to choose History or Geography in secondary school
  • Demotivated
Impact on HaSS

- Many pre-service teachers reported social studies as boring
  - consistent globally and over time (Lanahan & Yeager 2008; Owens 1997; Schug, Todd & Berry 1984).

- Students’ negative perceptions towards HaSS challenge University’s pre-service programs (Henning & Yehdhol-Hoppey 2004; Owens 1997).

- Negative perceptions avoid teaching this subject or reproduction of their experiences (Chapin & Messick 1996; Turner 1999).

- High-stakes testing & busy curriculum (Duplass 2007; Fritzer & Kumar 2002; Howard 2003; Yeager 2005).

What about teacher effectiveness?

• Effective teachers are passionate and enthusiastic (Larkins et al. 1985; Rosenshine 1971).

• Teachers need to be motivated by what they teach
  • Potentially affects students’ attitudes and enthusiasm for the subject

• The Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (2.1):
  • ‘demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the concepts, substance and structure of the content and teaching strategies of the teaching area’.

• Characteristics of effective & expert teachers identified content knowledge as a key element
  • Missing in the responses of many of the participants in this project.
The course structure

• Four modules:
  • Global Conflict and Peace; Sustainability; Rights and Freedom; Migration

• Underpinned by an inquiry process

• Global Conflict and Peace
  • World Wars - particularly Australia’s relationship with Asia
  • World War II, September 11, Bali Bombings
  • Peace initiatives (e.g. Gill Hicks’ PODs & the Rwandan stories)

• Sustainability
  • System’s perspective - social & environmental
  • Field studies

• Rights & Freedom
  • Australia’s history using the lens of Aboriginal peoples
  • Reconciliation

• Migration
  • Reasons for migration
  • Refugees and those seeking asylum

• Pre-service teachers are challenged with controversial materials which often leaves them feeling perplexed
  • Multiple perspectives

• Critical discussions in new challenging & unresolved issues as opposed to revisiting old ground (Owens 1997)
Post course findings: How do you feel about this course (HaSS) now?

• Most reported that they enjoyed the course
  • ‘I have very much enjoyed this course. I feel I have learnt a lot in terms of content and teaching strategies that will help me in my future teaching endeavours’

• Better informed & greater awareness of issues
  • ‘I believe that I have developed a greater awareness of the issues and discussion topics that are encompassed within the HaSS curriculum’

• Better prepared to teach HaSS
  • ‘Developed a better understanding of the variety of methods that can be applied within the class environment, in order to develop student understanding and awareness of these global issues’.

• Inspired & passionate
  • ‘I feel inspired to ensure my teaching is filled with HaSS concepts and understanding’
  • ‘I feel empowered to start planning deep/thoughtful classes for students that engage, inspire and provoke continued critical thinking’
  • ‘I really enjoyed the course and content. It certainly helped that Deb has a genuine interest and cared about what was being taught – it demonstrates how as long as you believe in what you are teaching you can make it accessible’

• Overwhelmed by the breadth of the topic
  • ‘I have enjoyed this course – I feel slightly overwhelmed by the enormous depth of topics that need to be covered, however I think HaSS is interesting and an essential subject for students’
How motivated and confident do you now feel about teaching this subject area?

• The majority reported an increase in motivation, confidence, knowledge and passion
  • ‘Rather confident as I now have an understanding of ways in which to lead a class through topics’
  • ‘Definitely the workshops have boosted my confidence. I have started thinking more positively about teaching HaSS.’
  • ‘Very motivated and interesting topics about realities of life’
What has been the most memorable or significant contribution this course has made to your learning?

• Indigenous content
  • ‘Learning about Indigenous Australians which I had not learnt much about before’
  • ‘The Aboriginal role play as it really allowed us to get in the mindset of what it was like in Australia at that time’

• Equality
  • ‘Learning the expression “we are more alike than we are different” which is an invaluable message to teach kids’

• Importance and value of discussion
  • ‘The activities that can be used to engage and promote questioning and collaborative learning’

• Teaching strategies and resources
  • ‘All the teaching strategies and resources that are good for HaSS.....it has significantly changed my views on teaching this subject area’

• Inquiry model and strategies to engage learners
  • ‘The inquiry model as well as the many strategies that you can use to build a student’s learning. I really like the various ways of engagement’
  • ‘Making it interesting. Engagement. Making sure everyone’s voice is heard’
Key messages

• Positive changes in pre-service teachers’ attitudes, confidence, enthusiasm and knowledge.

• ‘teach less but teach it well’ (Pressley & McCormick 1995).

• Opportunities to think through issues and concepts

• Discuss and respond to challenging questions

• Justify conclusions.

• An inquiry approach to learning
  • Australian Curriculum.

• Assessments were practical.
Inquiry based learning

• Underpinned by constructivist approaches
  • enables students to take control of their learning
  • helps develop a ‘true’ understanding of the content
  • Allows learners to ‘learn how to learn’ (Price, 2001).
  • Open-ended, student-centred, hands-on activities employed
  • Build on prior knowledge (Colburn 2000)
  • Development of students’ own questions

• By exploring, investigating, and observing students become involved in rigorous social interactions and engage in higher level thinking.
Developing active learners

‘I never enjoyed this subject at school, but this was mainly due to the teaching style’

• Pre-service teachers described teacher directed teaching methodologies
  • Little recollection or knowledge of topics
  • Lacked confidence or passion for the subject.

• Learning needs to be engaging, interactive and inquiry based to develop a love for HaSS.

• Encouraged pre-service teachers to be active learners as opposed to passive recipients of knowledge

• Important in all school settings.
Future iterations of the course: Where to from here?

• A range of technologies to make learning more engaging, student-centred and inclusive (Brush & Saye 2009; Shih, Chuang & Hwang 2010).
  • Although some technologies are currently being employed it is planned that this will increase.

• Link theory to practice
  • Web clips or podcasts of experienced teachers and exemplary practice in the field will be employed.
  • Pre-service teachers will develop burning questions that can be presented to experts in the field.
  • Volunteers?
Concluding comments

- Large gaps in pre-service teachers’ knowledge
  - Only one HaSS course in their degree makes it difficult to cover everything
  - Supply links to many readings and encourage students to read and learn about the topics they are going to teach

- Need to firstly re-ignite their passion for HaSS

- Tap into the cognitive and affective domains of the brain to engage students to learn and care about this important area of the curriculum.

- We need to start with our pre-service teachers as these future educators could be our champions.
  - ‘If schools are able to teach young people to have a critical mind and socially oriented attitude, they will have done all that is necessary. Students will then become equipped with those qualities which are prerequisite for citizens living in a healthy democratic society (Einstein).
Contact

• Please feel free to contact me if you have any queries or are willing to be involved in our theory to practice web clips.

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• Email: Deborah.green@unisa.edu.au

• Thank you
References


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